

Virginia Department of Veteran Services Town Hall Meetings

Suffolk Summary

The Virginia Department of Veterans Services (DVS) conducted town hall meetings in response to Governor Kaine's Executive Order 19. This executive order directs DVS and other state agencies to improve services to the state's veterans, especially disabled veterans.

DVS identified four primary areas of focus:

1. Outreach and communication with Virginia's veterans: How can we reach veterans and what information do they need and want?
2. Quality of life for all veterans: What are the needs of veterans, especially in terms of health care, services from state government agencies, and outreach to veterans who are homeless, incarcerated, or hospitalized?
3. Workforce development: How can we ensure that employment opportunities are available to veterans and how can we ensure that the private sector has access to the veteran labor pool. What can we do to assist veteran-owned businesses?
4. Technology: How can we use technology to communicate with and deliver services to veterans?

This report summarizes the comments provided by participants attending the session held at the Nansemond Suffolk Academy on March 5, 2007 in Suffolk, Virginia. Approximately 19 people attended the meeting including representatives from state agencies, nonprofit organizations, veterans' service organizations, retired and active servicemen and women and spouses of veterans.

The session gathered information concerning:

1. What currently works well in delivering state government services to veterans and what are the best practices in place?
2. What are the critical barriers to serving veterans and what are the most important issues facing veterans?
3. Recommendations for future action to improve state government services to veterans.

The meeting was facilitated by faculty from Virginia Commonwealth University's Office of Public Policy Training.

What is Currently Working Well to meet Veteran's Needs

1. The combined use of newspapers, e-mail and local TV stations to contact veterans
2. DVS support in filing claims
3. Phone calls from veteran service organizations (VSOs) alerting them of issues
4. Direct mail providing information on benefits and services
5. DVS providing information upon retirement or leaving active duty to get information/assistance on disabilities, employment assistance
6. Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provided by the military (begun in 1991) to inform military personnel about benefits - 3-day course is provided regarding the transition back to civilian life
7. BDD program on base
8. Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER) and Disabled Veterans' Outreach Programs (VDOP) administered by the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC)
9. the Veterans Administration (VA) is doing a good job but are understaffed – good facilities – long waits
10. Existing care centers are good

Critical Barriers to be Addressed

1. Lack of knowledge concerning DVS – not publicized – what does it do?
2. Getting veterans to contact or register with DVS
3. Older veterans are not getting as much attention right now – age gap exists
4. Lack of funding for health care – not enough good doctors
5. Increased number of female veterans with different needs
6. Younger veterans – career assistance needed, especially education assistance
7. Meeting existing veterans needs and meeting new needs of recent veterans
8. Many Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are returning with brain injuries – inadequate or no services and support systems to help integrate them back
9. Privacy laws hinder making contact sometimes
10. Not enough veteran advocacy
11. VSOs don't always know where to go to help members
12. Different federal agencies have different disability definitions and benefit levels
13. Large federal system – confusing to navigate and understand
14. Large backlog of claims
15. Different rulings provided on same claims – having to prove service
16. Young veterans are more reluctant to seek services – pride
17. Negative image of the VA system doesn't deliver a positive message to veterans, making them reluctant to seek services

Recommendations for Action

1. Identify who Virginia's veterans are – demographics and their needs – very different service and life experiences
2. DVS should become a conduit of information to VA and veteran service organizations and congressman – collective voice of Virginia
3. Establish one veteran's organization that speaks for all veterans to increase clout

4. Talk to veterans while they are transitioning in medical facilities, etc.
5. Reconnect with veterans after they return to their homes and/or families – 6 months is proper time
6. Get information to older veterans in various ways, such as polling places
7. Provide benefit flyers to all National Guard armories, VSOs, etc.
8. Send a letter to all veterans after they return home regarding DVS services
9. Use understandable language
10. Establish policies at state colleges that help veterans gain admission after they return from service
11. Have programs of information at VEC, Social Security Administration, etc.
12. Improve communication between VEC, State agencies and VSOs
13. Establish VirginiaForVeterans.com website to help disseminate information
14. Continue working with the Virginia Joint leadership Council to raise and address veterans' issues
15. Get more information to returning veterans – monthly newsletter, contact teams for outreach, and take it to them personally (churches, etc.) – use the National Guard and Reserve to make contact in their communities
16. Establish statewide information campaign for organizations to use – TV/Governor, movie spots
17. Improve standards of service and reduce claim backlog
18. Find ways to connect/help veterans after 90-day return window by VA – tie to CSBs, other state resources
19. Ensure all returnees attend TAP/DTAP – work with commanders of units – mandate attendance
20. Use IRS, DMV, other organizations to get word out – community college registrars, high school guidance counselors, etc.
21. Provide information to VFW, VSOs about returning veterans in their areas
22. Obtain contact information on veterans through VA centers and VEC
23. Network all service providers